

IN MEMORIAM  
JOHN W. O'MALLEY, S.J.  
(11.VI.1927–11.IX.2022)

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The Reverend Professor John O'Malley, S.J., who died 11 September 2022 at the age of 95, was among the leading experts in Renaissance history and early-modern Italy – especially its art, culture, and religion – as well as the history of the Catholic Church between the late-medieval period to the present. Stunningly interdisciplinary in his range of research and publications, John O'Malley's works were simultaneously erudite and accessible. For over five decades his scholarship has stood as a beacon of authority, clarity, and insight, across all of the disciplines in which he wrote: his dozen monographs, eleven edited and co-edited volumes and over one hundred articles consistently are influential, widely-read, and classic points of reference in their respective fields.

Among the many important ways that John O'Malley has shaped the field of history, three come to mind. First, in proposing the term 'Early Modern Catholicism' as a frame for research, he definitively extracted the field from its status as football to be kicked by scholars between the two opposing goalposts of 'Reformation' and 'Counter Reformation', thereby helping it land within its own conceptually neutral territory for exploration by a generation of researchers who wished to be unfettered by confessional bias (*Trent and All That: Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era*, Harvard University Press, 2000).

O'Malley's second main contribution was to bring to the English-reading world an appreciation of Italian history as a meeting point between the ancient classical tradition and the early-modern Christian one. An Erasmus of our times, he travelled, wrote, and talked to students and scholars about how to navigate the cultural and religious terrain of Western Christendom – in O'Malley's case,

through the prism of Italian history, which in turn helped put both Italy *and* the Greco-Roman/Judeo-Christian traditions firmly on the map of studies in the humanities across international English-reading university curricula (*Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521*, Duke University Press, 1979 and *Four Cultures of the West*, Harvard University Press, 2004).

Third, the Jesuit John O'Malley, more than any other scholar before or since, introduced the contemporary scholarly world to the riches of Jesuit history. Through his classic work, *The First Jesuits* (Harvard University Press, 1993), readers were given a front-row seat at the sixteenth-century founding of one of the most influential operators in the early-modern world, the Society of Jesus. Jesuit history is now interrogated by innumerable scholars in almost all conceivable fields of research – most significantly, perhaps, in global themes, since the Jesuits' own meanderings and recordings from every corner of the world have proven so valuable for thinking through the historical precedents of our own current global reality. O'Malley's publications in Jesuit history provided the historical, conceptual, and methodological tools to make possible the explosion in Jesuit Studies (Kennedy, T. Frank, Steven J. Harris, Gauvin Alexander Bailey, and John W. O'Malley, eds., *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and the Arts, 1540–1773*, 2 vol., University of Toronto Press, 2000 and 2006).

John O'Malley's working and personal style fostered natural scholarly communities. Scores of scholars across the world considered him an invaluable mentor; many experienced his warm encouragement in their academic labours; hundreds were taught by him in several North American institutions of higher education, including his fellow-Jesuits the world over, who avidly followed his classes. He provided field leadership through governance positions in both the university sector and wider scholarly spheres. His outstanding contribution to historical studies was marked in the form of numerous prizes, medals of recognition, and lifetime achievement awards. At the heart of this academic fame was an immensely likeable person, who was a charismatic leader in the field, with an infectious historical curiosity, informed by a surprisingly pared-down and at the same time extremely effective approach to his craft that might be summarised in the following terms: to find out what happened, what it meant, and why it matters. This historical worldview, which he enthusiastically shared with all around him, was so disarming that he brought many into the study of the worlds that he so masterfully explored with his students, colleagues, and readers of his works.

John O'Malley was born in Ohio in 1927 and entered the Jesuits in 1946 (within the then-Chicago Province of the Society of Jesus). During his formation, his interest in history drew him to consider specialising in German history, especially the Counter Reformation. In 1960, he was based in Austria (at the time with the

idea that he was to have gone on to Bonn to study under Hubert Jedin), when a brief visit to Italy led him to change the course of his studies (and his life). On his return to the United States, he began a doctorate in Renaissance Italian history at Harvard University, supervised by Myron P. Gilmore, who not only converted him to the Italian Renaissance but also to Italian ice cream. On the completion of his doctoral coursework at Harvard, O'Malley, still a doctoral student, went to the American Academy in Rome, where he stayed as Fellow for two years of research and writing that also gave rise to his first book (*Giles of Viterbo on Church and Reform: A Study in Renaissance Thought*, Brill, 1968). During his time in Rome, the Catholic Church's most important council of the modern era, Vatican II, was underway: the result was the addition of a further string to his research interests, encompassing the modern history of the Church's ecumenical councils, from Trent onwards.

Italy was important to John O'Malley's scholarship in other ways, too. Yet another research strand emerged from hours spent in art galleries and then in the restoration project of the Sistine Chapel, which generated the first of his many collaborative projects and publications in Art History (*The Sistine Chapel: The Art, the History, and the Restoration*, edited with Carlo Pietrangeli, Andre Chastel, John Shearman, et al. Random House, 1986).

The forging of John O'Malley's early identity as a scholar of the Italian Renaissance was consolidated in 1967–68, when he was appointed Fellow at Villa I Tatti, The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies, in the Fiesolan hills just outside Florence. In Italy, Rome continued to be an important setting for O'Malley, both as a Jesuit and as a scholar. As a member of two Jesuit General Congregations (meetings of the Society's worldwide senior members, usually convened to elect a new superior general for a life term, as well as the passing of decrees to aid the Society's operations) – held in Rome in 1974–75 and again in 1983 – he was asked to turn his attention to Jesuit history, the result of which was the *First Jesuits* and his subsequent studies in Jesuit history. In terms of his life as a Jesuit and a priest in the Catholic Church, a further significant trip to Rome took place towards the end of his life, in 2019, this time as a protagonist himself, giving testimony at the historically resonant cause for canonization of the twenty-eighth Jesuit Superior General Pedro Arrupe SJ (1907–1991).

John O'Malley's academic positions, all in the USA, provided the crucial institutional frameworks, collegial environments, pedagogical opportunities, and resources for his impressive scholarly output. These roles were at the University of Detroit (now the University of Detroit-Mercy, 1965–1979); Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts (later the Weston Jesuit School of Theology, 1979–2006), and Georgetown University (2006–2020).

In 2021, important insights into O'Malley's own personal history, his inspirations for becoming a historian, as well as his methods and influences, were shared with his many keen readers in a memoir titled *The Education of a Historian: A*

*Strange and Wonderful Story* (Saint Joseph's University Press, 2021). Several aspects of his practice stand out in the memoir, such as the importance of empathy towards one's subjects, and at the same time critical distance from them (« tempering suspicion with compassion », p. 50), and the primacy of the sources as guides for historians' questions, through an « ongoing dialogue between us and the text » (p. 175). He had no time for superimposing our own concerns onto past subjects. As he wrote of his discovery of this pitfall during his doctoral research on Giles of Viterbo: « I was trying to make Giles, a sixteenth-century thinker, answer my twentieth-century questions » (p. 73). He also knew that historical knowledge cannot be used to predict the future or enlisted with the aim of imitating (in the present) an imaginary past. Instead, according to O'Malley, studying the past teaches us « how we got to be who we are, what we are, where we are, and thus help us deal with the reality in which we live » (p. 153).

The necessary separation between the past and present was always evident to O'Malley:

Historians have no choice but to begin their research with their own questions, but those questions are simply clumsy tools to get at the questions driving the authors of the texts historians are studying. [...] The discovery of the questions interior to the texts is the indispensable step in arriving at convincing interpretations of the texts in question (p. 77).

This could only be achieved, he argued, through extensive research into their contexts: « Probing the historical assumptions of a text can thus unlock what the text is ultimately saying » (p. 90). Within this frame of cultural history, O'Malley rigorously drew on « multiple methods of wresting from the past its meaning and significance » (p. 3).

O'Malley's memoir also provides some clues to his success: clear and accessible writing. He wrote, rather wryly (and aware that historians are not always known for their succinctness or lucid prose): « Authors must conclude the book by telling readers the significance of what they have read [...] [which means] the historians must have themselves grasped the significance of what they have read » (p. 89).

Above all, O'Malley was a very human scholar, who was unafraid to allow his work to influence and shape his life – without sacrificing his professionalism. Describing his first visit to Italy in 1961 (when he had no knowledge of the Italian language), he wrote of his Italian Jesuit hosts: « I had no idea what they were saying [...] I understood on a level that did not need words. [...] There was more. I felt kinship [...] with Italians [...] as if I had at last found my true roots. This was crazy ». If Italy nourished John O'Malley and helped him acquire an identity in addition to his natal one, it was the study of history that shaped him: « The discipline of history, in which I live and breathe, to a great extent made me who and what I am » (p. 174).

The combination of scholarly inspiration, academic talent, optimistic temperament, and religious vocation made John O'Malley a unique scholar whose personal and scholarly legacy will be with us for many years to come. For those of us now tilling the fields where he worked, we may take inspiration from the simplicity of his approach to life, which probably helps explain his remarkable ability to share so much of his scholarly expertise with fellow-practitioners and students in the field: as he wrote only the year before he died about his move from Georgetown to his Jesuit retirement home in Baltimore – his last place of residence – he mused: « I seem to have been able happily to commit myself to most situations in which I found myself » (p. 173).